

Soldiers *Online*

THE SOLDIER-EM

MSG Bob Haskell



Defense officials maintain that employer support is vital for reserve-component troops such as these Army National Guard engineers from Mississippi serving in Belize (*above*) or other Guard members serving in Bosnia (*far right*).

EMPLOYER TEAM

Story by MSG Bob Haskell and SSG T.K. Lawson

BOUND for Bosnia? Or Kosovo? Or Saudi Arabia or Kuwait? Will peacekeeping be your primary concern for a few months within the next year or so? Then talk to your civilian bosses as soon as possible so you can reclaim your jobs after you come marching home again.

That's the long-standing advice that national advocates for re-employment rights offer members of the reserve component, and their commanders, who will be serving their country in uniform.

The advocates are assigned to the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve — commonly called ESGR. Army and Air National Guard leaders are emphasizing that message throughout 2001, which the National Guard has designated as the “Year of the Employer.”

In a nutshell, ESGR strives to foster good relations between the reserve component and civilian employers, and to keep all parties informed about the provisions and benefits of the 1994 Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act.

“Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve plays a vital role in this country's military readiness. Making that part of the command philosophy is the best way the National Guard and Reserve can help their own people and ESGR,” said Army National Guard MAJ Hunt Kerrigan, a spokesman for the national committee in Arlington, Va.

People such as acting Executive Director Michael Naylor are striving to keep America's business people abreast of the demands that military deployments are placing on many of their key workers.

“Employer” is the key word in ESGR, according to Naylor, who is also the organization's first civilian chief of staff. “We see civilian employers as under-

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writing the Department of Defense,” he said.

Some employers continue to provide health-care benefits for families of their Guard- or Reserve-member reservists who are deployed to foreign lands for extended periods, he said.

“The 1.3 million people who serve in the reserve component make up almost half of this nation’s military strength. That’s why it’s more important than ever that they have the full support of their employers,” added Naylor, repeating a key message in a national public service advertising campaign that ESGR launched in late April.

That underscores President George W. Bush’s support for the nation’s civilian employers.

“Citizen-soldiers have always depended on selfless employers. They care about their states and they care about their country above love of profit,” said the former Texas Air National Guard pilot while visiting Guard troops at Charleston, W. Va., earlier this year. “You have the gratitude of our nation.”

Naylor believes the ESGR’s national committee should be more than a watchdog for Guard members and Reservists who encounter conflicts with their employers.

“We have to be more conscious of the ESGR commit-



Michael Naylor is the acting executive director at the ESGR's national office in Arlington, Va.

tees and the 4,500 volunteers in our 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Virgin Islands,” he said. “The National Committee needs to enhance its efforts to increase everyone’s awareness about the Guard and Reserve missions and the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act.”

EXISTING ESGR PROGRAMS

1. “MISSION ONE,” which places volunteers in Guard and Reserve training centers to provide information and assistance for employment problems.

2. “BREAKFAST WITH THE BOSS” and other forums for exchanging information and addressing employer concerns, and “Bosslifts” that take civilian employers to the military installations where their workers actually serve.

3. AN OMBUDSMAN PROGRAM at the national headquarters, which provides information about federal re-employment statutes and deals with specific cases involving civilian supervisors and their reserve-component workers.

4. “STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT” CERTIFICATES, which individual companies and chambers of commerce are asked to sign, post and publicize as their pledge to allow employees the necessary time off for Guard and Reserve training without endangering civilian careers or giving up vacation time.

5. AWARDS AND RECOGNITION PROGRAMS, such as “My Boss Is a Patriot” and Freedom Awards that reward civilian employers at state and national levels.

A database of employers and reserve-component members, improved planning for the use of military members, and more timely notice to employers about upcoming deployments will also benefit business people, ESGR officials believe.

These are challenging times for the ESGR program, which was chartered by the Defense Department in 1972 because so many of the country’s reserve-component members are being factored into the military’s long-range plans.

As of May, 23,097 reserve-component troops had pulled peacekeeping tours in Bosnia since December 1995; 7,796 had been sent to help stabilize Kosovo; and 3,391 had been deployed to Southwest Asia to support no-fly zone patrols over northern and southern Iraq.

The reserve component’s increasing operational tempo means more people will be leaving their civilian jobs, fully expecting to resume those careers a few months later. That means more people are paying attention to the ESGR’s national committee; to the 4,500 volunteer business, civic, academic and military leaders on committees across the country; and to re-employment laws.

“Our Ombudsman Directorate answered 7,290 inquiries last year, and our website receives an average of 4,500 hits every week,” Naylor said.

Most employers do support their workers who belong to the reserve component, according to the Defense Department’s 1999 Reserve Employer Survey of 2,037 large and small employers. Of those interviewed, 96 percent were satisfied with their reserve-component employees; 93 percent expressed a favorable attitude toward reserve-component service; 92 percent have flexible policies to accommodate absences; and 86 percent said reserve-component employees are good team players.

But the results were not entirely favorable.

Come October 2001, a record 2,461 Guard soldiers are expected to begin a six-month tour in Bosnia. That means more people will be leaving civilian jobs fully expecting to resume their careers a few months later.

“The survey revealed a general lack of knowledge about the Guard and Reserve,” said Charles Cragin, the acting assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs.

Awareness about laws designed to protect reserve-component members appears to be relatively widespread, the survey showed. But only one in five employers of reserve-component members indicated an awareness of employer support programs like ESGR.

“These results ... suggest the department still has much work to do in improving its outreach to the business community,” Cragin said.

Convincing rather than coercing business people to support workers with military obligations seems to work best.

“ESGR is not an enforcement agency and does not offer legal counsel or advice,” points out the National Guard Almanac.

But it does detail how federal law protects members of the reserve component who want to step back into their civilian jobs after extended military duty. □

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

THE re-employment act states that most people can expect to resume their civilian careers as if they had never left provided they meet five guidelines:

- ✗ They must have left a full-time civilian job.
- ✗ They must have given notice that they were leaving to perform military service.
- ✗ In most cases, the total period of service must not exceed five years.
- ✗ They must be released from service under honorable or general conditions.

✗ They must report back to work or apply for re-employment within the period prescribed by law. That includes the next regularly scheduled shift following safe travel home and eight hours of rest after up to 30 days of duty; within 14 days after service of 31 to 180 days; and within 90 days after duty of 181 days or more.

“Employees returning from military service must be re-employed in the job they would have attained had they not been absent for military service and with the same seniority, status and pay, as well as other rights and benefits determined by seniority,” the law states.

Benefits include pensions, health-care and insurance coverage, and any training necessary for resuming the old job.

The law also says employers must also make “reasonable efforts” to accommodate people who were disabled or whose previous disability was aggravated by the military service.

That means people with medical conditions are protected from being discharged, except for cause, for 180 days if they served from 31 to 180 days, and for one year if they served for more than 180 days.

By most accounts, the law is generous indeed to the reserve-component members who leave civilian jobs to serve in uniform, provided they follow the basic guidelines and keep their bosses informed. — *MSG Bob Haskell*



Navy veteran Bill Madan (left) took time from his electric and motor company in Nevada to visit Army National Guard soldiers, including one of his employees, serving at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif.